PRODUCTION NOTES

Official Synopsis

“Chang Can Dunk” follows Chang, a 16-year-old, Asian American high school student in the marching band, who bets the school basketball star that he can dunk by Homecoming. The bet leads the 5 ’8" Chang on a quest to find the hops he needs to dunk in order to impress his crush, Kristy, and finally gain the attention and respect of his high school peers. But before he can rise up and truly throw one down, he’ll have to reexamine everything he knows about himself, his friendships and his family. “Chang Can Dunk” will premiere exclusively on Disney+ March 10.

Written and Directed by Jingli Shao in his feature film debut, “Chang Can Dunk” stars Bloom Li (“My Dead Ex” “Into the Dark”), Dexter Darden (“Son of the South,” “Saved by the Bell”), Ben Wang (Disney’s Launchpad short “Dinner is Served”), Zoe Renee (“Jin,” “The Quad”), Chase Liefeld (“Sunnyside Up,” upcoming “Honor Student”) and Mardy Ma. Rishi Rajani, Lena Waithe and Brad Weston served as the film’s producers, with Pamela Thur as executive producer.

Director’s Statement

It’s a fact. Everybody wants to dunk. You would be hard pressed to think of a single act which can so immediately drop jaws and inspire awe. It’s a simple feat - slam the ball in the damn hoop! - but for many, it is literally out of reach...Or is it?

Growing up as an immigrant kid, and often the only Asian in class, I found myself bumping into many invisible barriers. What I could eat at lunch, who I could hang out with, what I should be good at. It took years of trial and error to cobble together something that felt like me but was

also accepted by my peers. It was isolating and frustrating, and often put me at odds with my parents who were dealing with their own struggles of fitting in. It felt like I was trapped in a box of other people's perceptions - and it's hard to dream in a box.

But then, I discovered basketball. On the court, you might be picked last, but if you got in the game, you always had a chance to prove your worth. Game must respect game, and ball don't lie. I became obsessed, playing day and night, on the playground and in my head. I got pretty good. Not NBA good, but enough to change people's perceptions of me, including my own. And from that, I learned something important. YOU define what YOU can do. It's a truth that has allowed me to stand up for myself, to push myself, to dream wildly. To fly.

This movie is my DUNK. It's my love letter to basketball and about how it helped me better understand family, friendship and the Asian American/immigrant experience. It's about growing up and taking responsibility even when the odds are against you. But mostly, "Chang Can Dunk" is about learning to believe in yourself. To break through not only the barriers set by others but more importantly, the barriers set by YOURSELF. Even if it's to do something small or simple. Like dunking a basketball.

Production Information

"Chang Can Dunk" was born out of a 2018 conversation between writer-director Jingli Shao and producer Rishi Rajani when Rajani hired Shao to direct an episode of the TV series "Boomerang." At the time, Rajani was Vice President of Hillman Grad, the entertainment company founded by Emmy® Award-winning writer, producer, and actor, Lena Waithe. He is now CEO.

Recalls Rajani, "I'd been a fan of Jing's work and really loved his writing. Back then he pitched me this idea for a movie about an Asian American kid who wanted to learn how to dunk a basketball."

Shao's inspiration came from events in his own life, having emigrated from China to the U.S. with his parents when he was a young boy.

Shao explains, "Growing up, basketball had a huge impact on me. In high school I was dealing with a lot of the growing pains of being a teenager, trying to fit in, trying to figure out who I was, and basketball and the friends I made through basketball really helped me with that. So, I was really inspired to put my personal experiences with basketball into a film."

One of these experiences informed one of his story's major plot points.

Shao says, “I had this huge crush on a girl, but there was another guy who also liked her, and he was really cool, more popular than me, and he was also a terrific basketball player. So, in my teenage logic, I thought that meant I had to get better at basketball, and that is how my obsession with basketball started--basically, to impress this girl.”

At first Rajani was concerned whether Shao’s premise was too small, but after he and Shao talked about it, it dawned on them that it actually had a great deal of universal appeal.

Rajani says, “We realized that everyone has a ‘dunk, ’a dream, a thing that they're trying to accomplish, especially they’re young, when they’re in high school and coming of age.”

Shao says, “For me what was powerful about using dunking as a metaphor is that everyone has seen a basketball hoop. It’s right there. It’s 10 feet. All you have to do is jump up and slam it down. My philosophy of life is that all goals are like that. But sometimes we make it more complicated than it is and tell ourselves why we can’t do something rather than why we can.”

Rajani’s producing partner at Makeready, Brad Weston, believed in the concept and agreed to finance their developing the script. Working together, Shao and Rajani infused it with slices of their own lives as Asian American men in this country. Soon Shao delivered what Rajani describes as an “absolutely stunning” script.

Both men believed that the perfect home for the project would be Disney.

Says Shao, “I grew up on Disney movies. I’m an immigrant kid, and I think I watched so many Disney movies growing up because I wanted to know about where I was and understand how I could fit in, and they really shaped me. I’m a child of the ‘90s and back then one of my favorite films was Disney’s “The Mighty Ducks,” which was hilarious, with amazing characters and full of heart. I basically wanted to bring that back, a sports coming-of-age film told for today’s generation.”

The filmmakers had another motivation: Asian American representation.

Shao explains, “It’s really important for me to tell stories that a younger version of me would have really loved to have seen. Growing up, there weren’t a lot of Asian American male characters in films that I could really relate to because rarely were we the protagonist or the hero of those stories. So, I really wanted to create a story that the younger version of myself would have loved to have seen. I think it’s important for young people to see themselves as the protagonist, as someone who has agency over their lives and not just as a side character. Movies have real power, especially for young people and how they envision their futures to be.”

Disney was enthusiastic about Shao's script, which placed second on the 2021 Blacklist, and agreed to make it for their streaming service, Disney+.

"Chang Can Dunk" begins with the all-important first day of school. Chang has spent the summer thinking about how sophomore year is going to be different from his painful freshman year, that he's going walk into school and his peers are going to see him differently. He's got a new haircut. He's got a new wardrobe. He goes to school, where he meets up with his best friend, Bo, who, like Chang, is Asian American, but unlike Chang, is comfortable with who he is. Seeing the other kids in front of the school, Chang encounters them with his newly assumed level of confidence, only to suffer humiliation, and his confidence quickly disappears.

That same day, Chang meets a new student, Kristy, and is immediately smitten. Like him, she likes music and is in the school's marching band. However, he wonders whether she would ever go for a guy like him who's not cool. He learns that she's attending an after-school pool party at the home of his former childhood friend Matt, who's now the high school basketball star and and decides to crash. Popular with the ladies and also interested in Kristy, Matt casts doubt on Chang's chances with her, which prompts Chang to publicly make a bet with Matt that he will dunk a basketball by Homecoming. This way, he will prove to everyone, and especially Kristy, how cool he is.

To make that happen, Chang enlists the aid of a basketball whiz he finds on YouTube, Steve Urkel, who's really a cell phone salesman named Deandre. A former high school basketball star who had a couple NBA tryouts and ended up moving overseas where he scored some success, he's come home and the big career opportunities have passed him by. Nevertheless, he devises an intense training program for Chang and becomes not only his dunking coach but also something of a life coach. With Deandre guiding him and Bo and Kristy to cheer him on, what could possibly stop Chang from reaching his goal of dunking?

Rajani says, "Chang is a kid who desperately wants to be liked--to be considered cool—and desperately wants to fit into his community. He feels like an outsider and fundamentally believes that by accomplishing his goal of dunking, he can change his life and change his reality."

An only child, Chang lives with his mom Chen, an emigrant from China who's divorced from his father and works full-time as a nurse.

Says Shao, "Chen wants Chang to focus on his studies and keep his commitment to work after school at the hospital where she's employed. But Chang's attention is elsewhere. Because she has to work a lot, she doesn't quite observe some of the other things that Chang is dealing with, so there's a lack of understanding and communication between the two of them. It's a bit strained."

Rajani says, “The core relationship of the film is really Chang’s with his mother. It is a very specific generational relationship, and one that I think a lot of first- and second-generation immigrant kids really have to deal with. Their parents have come from a very specific world, a very specific situation, and many have fought incredibly hard to get here. And there's a level of culture shock for someone whose family is from somewhere else and just wants to come here and fit in. So, I think so much of this movie is about those sort of incredibly pervasive immigrant issues.

While generally comedic in tone, “Chang Can Dunk” deals with a variety of relatable coming-of-age themes. One of the primary themes is the need to break through barriers and overcome other people’s expectations of us as well as the self-limitations we set for ourselves and the growth that comes when we push ourselves to achieve goals that seem impossible or unattainable.

Shao points out, “There’s this quote in the film: ’“Every obstacle is an opportunity. ’It’s not just a sports saying, it’s the mentality of every underdog who has a dream. How do you take what you have and make the best with it, especially when you don’t have the privileges that others have or maybe you have things to deal with that other people don’t. Whether that’s your family, your home, your life, your school, whatever.”

The film also covers the angst of the teenage experience and issues of peer pressure, dating, popularity and fitting in, particularly when we look different than most of our schoolmates. At that time in our lives, it’s especially difficult for us to embrace who we are.

Rajani explains, “Sometimes I think when we're growing up, and especially when we feel othered in some way, shape, or form, we feel like we should be trying to fit in, to integrate, to be liked, to be popular, and we make that our purpose in life. When I was younger, I wanted that. I was running away from a lot of things that made me uniquely me, whether it was my cultural heritage, my background, my identity, my skin color, my religion. Being in this country, I wanted to be like everybody else. And I think part of what this movie is about is Chang being able to find purpose outside of all that.”

Shao agrees. He says, “When you’re at Chang’s age, it’s really easy to feel isolated, because you’re coming into your own and trying to figure out what works for you. Sometimes that pushes you away from your family or your friends for a while, and it’s really hard. I think at that time, it’s really important to have something that you’re striving for--a goal--because when you have a goal, you know what you care about. And if you know what you care about, then you know what kind of person you want to be and what you’re working towards.

Additionally, “Chang Can Dunk” focuses on the effects of challenging family dynamics in a person’s coming-of-age, including the loss of a parent, divorce, the relationship between a working single parent and an only child and the specific pressures that can affect the children

of immigrants. It also deals with the importance of staying true to your friends as well as the ethical issues of cheating and taking responsibility when we make the wrong choices.

Says Rajani, "Ultimately, Chang realizes that there's power that comes within himself. That he's been stepping into an identity, and that he doesn't have to necessarily fit in. That there's so much power to his experience, to his cultural background and as a human being and a person. That his worth is not determined by his ability to dunk a basketball."

Rajani's hopes for the film?

"I hope that Asian American audiences feel really seen in watching this movie," he says. "I hope that Asian American kids feel like they have a hero in Chang, and people who aren't Asian American will also see themselves in the film, and that everyone will fall in love with Chang's journey. I hope people also have fun watching it. I grew up with Disney movies, and to me, this is the spirit of a Disney movie. It has heart, it has humor, it's charming, and it has great characters that you can get behind."

And Shao's?

"One of my biggest hopes is that people who watch this film come out of it thinking about what their 'dunk 'is. What is that thing that they've always wanted to do but maybe didn't have the time or were a little afraid perhaps to even try. And I hope that they find some courage and they just go for it. I want people to find their dunk."

To bring the story to life on screen, the filmmakers assembled a talented and diverse cast of new faces and veterans.

For the lead role of Chang, working with the Disney casting team, they embarked upon a massive nationwide search. It wasn't an easy role to cast.

Shao recalls,**"** We needed to have a kid who looks like he could be in high school, who had to act in a lot of difficult situations. He had to be funny. He had extremely emotional, dramatic scenes. He also needed to be able to play basketball and be around 5'8". So, there were a lot of requirements for the role.

I was really looking for someone who could portray Chang in the beginning of the film, when he's a naïve, slightly immature, but good kid, and also be able to play him at the end of the film, when he is much more mature, knows himself a lot better and is a lot more confident. So, to find someone with the youthfulness to play that early version of Chang but also the strength to play the changed Chang, that was really tough as it required a lot of range."

After viewing hundreds of tapes, they came across one from an actor named Bloom Li, who had appeared in the TV series “My Dead Ex,” “Discover Indie Film,” “S.W.A.T.” and “Into the Dark.” Encouraged by a friend, he submitted a self-tape for the role on his own.

Shao says, “In Bloom, we found someone who had a lot of soul behind his eyes. He had confidence, but there was also a vulnerability underneath, and that was really important to the character. When you see him, you just want him to succeed.”

Turns out that the actor had a lot in common with the character he played.

Says Li, “The script related so much to my experience. I’m a Chinese American kid. Chang’s Mandarin isn’t that great, and my Mandarin isn’t that great. Growing up, I loved basketball as well. I think a lot of that came from being a lonely kid to immigrant parents. And basketball was something that was simple, accessible, uncomplicated. Just five on five, a ball and a rim, and you felt like you were a part of a community when you were playing it. So, I definitely found solace in basketball. And I definitely wanted to dunk. There was a summer over high school where I Googled how to dunk, and I really tried. It was it was just a really perfect character for me to play.”

He continues, “I always dreamed of being an actor. This has really been a ride. Working with all these incredible people and really challenging myself every day, I really enjoyed it, and I learned a lot, and I think that's the best part.

About Li, Rajani says, “There’s such a sort of level of humanity that he brings to the role, and he is such a professional. Every single day on set, he was consistent, prepared and brought this incredible energy. Every day he would come in and say the same catchphrase: “today's gonna be lit.” And he's in every single scene of the movie. He worked really, really hard. It was so inspiring for us to have someone that could really bring Chang to life the way that Bloom has, such a blessing for us and for the production. I know he's going have a huge career from here.”

As Deandre, the dunking coach Chang discovers on YouTube, who sells cell phones to make a living, the filmmakers chose Dexter Darden, a former pro basketball player and two-time Estonia League MVP who appeared in all three “Maze Runner” films and more recently was seen in the film “Son of the South” and the rebooted “Saved by the Bell” series.

Darden says, “I had basketball experience. I actually used to be pretty good when I was a kid. I played every day from the time I was seven up until 15, you know, AAU, high school, community basketball. But then I started becoming interested in the arts, so I put basketball on the back burner to just focus on entertainment, singing, dancing, acting. So when this role came along and Deandre’s a former basketball player who can still hoop, I’m like okay, let me get back in, dust off my kicks.”

Working with these kids and having the opportunity just to build and create with them every single day is a learning experience. And I'm just so honored and blessed to have that opportunity."

Rajani says, "Dexter's a force. It was really hard to find someone who had that right mix of energy and enthusiasm, but also sage wisdom. He could be there for Chang but also be able to have fun and have a lightness and also have his own ambitions. Dexter's character really wants to be one of these YouTube basketball sensations. He wants to be a coach that everyone knows, and I think he sees the opportunity in Chang coming to him and his teaching Chang how to dunk. At first it feels like a cool opportunity for his YouTube channel, but then it grows into a real friendship, partnership, and mentorship. There's a real sweetness in the way Dexter's plays these scenes, and I love the enthusiasm in those training moments when he and Bloom are together."

"Dexter," says Shao, "was the older brother of the group. He showed a lot of leadership. He'd already been in so many movies, and he came onboard, took everyone under his wing and really created this sort of family dynamic between all the actors. Which really helped me as a director and really created this sort of safety and true camaraderie in the film."

To play Chang's best friend Bo, they selected Ben Wang, who recently appeared in the Disney Launchpad short "Dinner is Served" and in the films "Sex Appeal" and "Good Egg" as well as the series "MacGyver," "The Last O.G." and "Search Party."

Recalls Shao,**"** We were looking for a best friend who is smart, who's witty, who knows exactly who he is and isn't afraid to be who he is, even if that person is a bit of a dork. Bo already has a vision for himself, and he's gonna be big. He's the kid who's going to be the CEO of his own Fortune 500 company in the future. Ben just totally owned that role."

"Ben is just an incredible actor," says Rajani. "He brought so much of the humor of the character of Bo in ways that I didn't ever expect. Ben has performed on Broadway, he's engaged in the musical theater community, that's his background. Ben really brought a lot of joy to the production."

Zoe Renee, who starred in the independent film "Jinn" and in recurring roles on such series as "The Quad," "Black Lightning" and "Tell Me Lies," was cast as Chang's crush, Kristy, who plays the drum in the school marching band.

Shao says, "Zoe is amazing. With Kristy I was searching for someone who just had that feel of maturity--older for her age, someone who has been through a lot who would inspire Chang to be his best self and grow up a little bit. When she first read with Bloom, their chemistry was really awesome. You could tell that she had this magnetic presence that Chang would want to be closer to, and that around her, he would want to be his best self."

Recalls Renee, “Jing wanted Kristy to be a real person, raw. She’d gone through so much. She lost her father and moved to a new town, and so I think Jing really wanted her to be a character that was fresh and new and excited to be in this place but not a normal high school student. She's experienced a little bit more. She's also visibly different than everybody else. She's a little bit more edgy, rocking her rings and darker clothes and band T's, and I think that intrigues Chang because it's just so different than what he's used to.”

Jing was so generous about having conversations where we would talk about Kristy and figure out what's honest to her and what's real to her, which is so nice because we could build off that to create her character.”

Rajani says, “The first chemistry read between Zoe and Bloom over Zoom was electric. Zoe is a phenomenal actor. She brought this curiosity to the role that’s incredibly palpable and a whole lot of depth to all these little moments in very single scene she’s in. The preparedness was so evident, not to mention the fact that her drumming was just off the charts amazing, I'm so excited for the world to see her rock out.”

Chase Liefeld, who had a recurring role on the series “Sunnyside Up” and will soon be seen in the film “Honor Student,” portrays Chang’s former childhood friend-turned-nemesis, Matt.

“The high school jock role can be such a trope,” says Rajani,” but Chase brought this funny, but honest personality to the character, who’s not just malicious but a little bit out of touch with his own privilege. Chase plays a handsome, athletic, all-American guy whose parents are together, and on a surface level, he doesn't really have a whole lot of things that are wrong in his life. But Chase has been able to showcase how sometimes those privileges are blind spots for individuals. And you can kinda see the hints of a former friendship between him and Chang.”

Liefeld explains, “Jing is so talented. He has such a good pulse on kids and how they talk. Matt isn’t the stereotypical mean jock kid. He’s a just little ignorant about certain things, and he can be harsh at times because he always gets what he wants. And because he always gets a yes to everything, on that rare occasion when he’s told no, and it doesn’t go exactly how he had planned, he doesn’t react as well as he should and can sometimes take things a little too far.

Being able to work with Jing has just been a dream because he’s got great instincts and such a unique lens looking at things, but he’s also super open to collaborating and wants to hear other thoughts.”

The relationship between Chang and his mother is a central part of the film, and like Chang, casting Chen proved challenging. The role required she be a Chinese-born, Mandarin speaker who understood the immigrant experience and could also act. At the last minute, they cast

Mardy Ma, a veteran of 30 U.S. and Chinese films, series and shorts who will soon be seen in the Disney+ series “American Born Chinese” and Amazon Studios“ ’Expats.”

Ma says, “Jing told me a lot about his mother, who Chang’s mother in the film is based on. He didn’t want this Chinese mother to be a stereotype, he wants a specific character. She works very hard to provide a better life for her son, but she doesn’t understand him, and she doesn’t know how to be a parent. She thinks she’s doing the right thing, but she doesn’t let him breathe.

Says Rajani, “Getting Mardy was far and away one of the best things that could've ever happened to this film. Mardy has her own sort of fascinating story and life journey that's gotten her to this point, and she brings all that life and experience, too. I think there's gonna be a lot of kids of immigrants who see a lot of their own parents in Mardy and see a lot of those qualities not easy to capture, not easy to find and identify. From a pure acting standpoint, Mardy's also just an incredible force.

Shao says, “We were lucky to find Mardy, who really brought an authenticity that you just cannot replicate. When she would deliver her lines and look at Bloom a certain way, I really saw flashes of my own mother--to the point that I got nervous myself.”

In addition, former NBA player Jay Williams, the announcer of ESPN’s “The Get Up” appears in the film, along with Andre Drummond of the Chicago Bulls, ESPN reporter Kimberley Martin and former NBA players turned ESPN sports analysts Kendrick Perkins Richard A. Jefferson.

Along with the actors, the filmmakers insisted on authenticity in all aspects of the production.

Rajani explains, “Every single choice and decision Jing makes is deliberate. ‘Chang Can Dunk ’is one of the very few, if any, Hollywood-produced coming-of-age, Asian American high school movies, so it was really important that we captured that particular experience. Jing’s very detail oriented. I think that’s what makes him such an extraordinary filmmaker.”

it was really important for Shao to make the dunk training as realistic as possible. “I wanted kids to watch this movie and see exercises that would help them dunk,” he says.

To achieve that realism, they engaged a professional dunker named Connor Barth, who is also a trainer, to design a program that would actually help someone of Chang’s age to increase their vertical and be able to dunk.

Rajani said, “Connor, who is legitimately one of the top ten dunkers in the country, devised all the training exercises in the film to make sure they were genuine, using real weights. He worked very closely with Jing, so that a real basketball head watching the movie would buy into the training and the dunking scenes.”

Says Shao, “Bloom actually trained with Connor’s program, and he was able to significantly increase his vertical. Bloom is actually 5’8” in real life, and he would have to jump over 40 inches to send the basketball down.”

“Chang Can Dunk” was filmed in Stamford, Connecticut and New York City with production beginning on October 13, 2021 and wrapping on December 3, 2021.

For the look and style of the film, Shao drew from his own personal experiences growing up in the East Coast tri-state area, as well as research on today’s teenage and high school culture. Again, striving for authenticity, he worked closely with his department heads, including director of photography Ross Riege, production designer Maite Perez-Nievas, costume designer Joshua J. Marsh and location manager Louis Zuppardi, to make sure that they understood the story he was trying to tell while wanting the film to feel real and grounded to teenagers today.

Shao says, “Growing up, every year the passage of time was represented by the seasons. So, from summer to fall, you’d see the leaves changing, then wintertime with snowfall and so forth. I thought it could make a really powerful visual statement in terms of Chang transforming over the course of the film. We (the filmmaking team) discussed light transformation, and capturing that through the locations, through the lighting, through the costumes.

He also drew inspiration from the ‘80s and early’90s films by John Hughes (“Sixteen Candles,” “The Breakfast Club,” “Pretty in Pink”) he enjoyed as a kid. “They were both simple and character-focused,” Shao says, “but they also had this sort of breadth to capture a place in a very powerful way. So, we often looked back and referenced those. I hope that when people like me who grew up with those films watch ‘Chang Can Dunk, ’it’ll feel a bit nostalgic and remind them of those films.”

Shao contributed a sense of genuineness to the film in many other ways, including by throwing in some cultural specificities that were inspired by interactions with his own parents growing up. Even the soup featured in the dining room table scenes between Chang and Chen, which was inspired by a soup that Shao’s mother would make when he was growing up.

He explains, “It was basically a Shanghainese borscht. She would use this soup to communicate all sorts of things to me. If she wanted me to join some extracurricular activities or something, she would make me the soup. If we had a fight, and she wanted to say sorry, she would make me the soup. I think that food is an important culturally specific way that Asian American families communicate, and it’s something that I wanted to inject into the film.”

Ultimately, what Shao and Rajani poured into “Chang Can Dunk” was themselves.

Says Shao, "This film has been an incredible journey. It started with a single image that just came to me of a kid in the snow trying to dunk. And he just tries and tries and tries and tries. It's crazy because I wrote a whole film around it. but I didn't quite understand why that image was so important to me for the longest time--until I finally realized that it was actually me trying to tell my story, trying to make my first film. There were so many moments that I looked to the character of Chang for inspiration because I realized that making the film was my version of trying to dunk. And so, to have finished it, to have it come out on Disney +, I feel like I've dunked."

Rajani says, "Jing and I infused a lot of our own experiences as Asian American men in this country into this project. Everyone at Disney's passion and love and enthusiasm for 'Chang Can Dunk 'made it very clear to us that this is a movie that would've meant the world to us when we were younger. Disney has been an incredible partner all the way though, and it's been a phenomenal journey, and I'm really grateful to have been a part of it.

ABOUT THE CAST

BLOOM LI (Chang) is a New York-based actor. The youngest of three children and born to Chinese immigrants, Bloom grew up in New York City's Chinatown and New Jersey. He moved to Los Angeles to pursue an acting career and studied with master teachers, Stuart Rogers and Marjo-Riikka Makela.

Numerous short films that Bloom has appeared in have played at the Los Angeles Asian Pacific Film Festival, Palm Springs International ShortFest, and South by Southwest.

DEXTER DARDEN (Deandre) most recently starred as the leading role in Hulu's holiday comedy and hit film "The Binge 2: It's a Wonderful Binge" which started streaming last December. Dexter reprised his role as Hags in the new holiday adventure featuring magical storybooks and catchy songs. He starred opposite Vince Vaughn and Skyler Gisondo in the first installment of the series.

He can also soon be seen following the footsteps of Dave Chappelle in playing his son in the highly anticipated "Half Baked 2," the sequel to the 1998 cult comedy. "Half Baked 2" follows Dexter's character, JR, and his friends Miles and Cori, played by Moses Storm and Ramona Young, as they work to find the money to bury their friend Bruce (Joel Courtney), who died from smoking the world's most powerful joint. HALF BAKED 2premieres worldwide later this year.

Darden is known for his leading role in the Peacock/NBC hit series reboot of "Saved By The Bell." Dexter plays fan favorite Devante Young" a mysterious loner who comes to Bayside with a bad reputation but secretly dreams of reinventing himself at his new school. He starred opposite original "Saved By The Bell" alumnae including Mario Lopez and Elizabeth Berkley!

He starred as the role of famed civil rights leader and political figure John Lewis in the Spike Lee produced feature film "Son of the South" opposite Lucy Hale, Lucas Till, Jake Abel, Brian Dennehy, and Julia Ormond.

In addition, Darden's film "Burden" won the audience award at Sundance 2018 which he stars in opposite Forest Whitaker, Garrett Hedlund, Usher Raymond and Tom Wilkinson.

Prior to gaining popularity from the "Maze Runner" films playing Frypan, he played Queen Latifah's son in the Warner Brothers feature "Joyful Noise" and was also seen in the Sony feature "Cadillac Records." Darden has also been seen in the films "Geography Club," "Standing Ovation," "My Brother" and has guest starred on "Victorious" and "Cougar Town." He has also lent his voice to multiple leading roles in the scripted podcast "Bronzeville" alongside Laurence Fishburne, Larenz Tate, Tracee Ellis Ross and Omari Hardwick.

Dexter currently resides in Los Angeles.

BEN WANG (Bo) stars as Jin Wang in the upcoming Disney+ original series "American Born Chinese" alongside Michelle Yeoh, Daniel Wu, and Ke Huy Kwan which is set to release Spring 2023. Other credits include CBS's "MacGyver," "Search Party" on HBO, Hulu teen comedy "Sex Appeal" and Tracy Morgan's "The Last O.G." Wang is also a musical theater actor, with credits Off Broadway and in the Broadway-bound cast of "Sing Street the Musical."

ZOE RENEE (Kristy) will be seen in the highly anticipated "The Hunger Games: Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes." She recurred in Hulu's successful series "Tell Me Lies" and starred opposite Regina Hall in the Amazon Studios thriller "Master," which premiered at the 2022 Sundance Film Festival. Renee is best known for her breakout role in the critically acclaimed festival feature "Jinn." Other credits include "Gully," opposite Kelvin Harrison Jr., Charlie Plummer and Jonathan Majors; "Nancy Drew and the Hidden Staircase" (Warner Bros); "Black Lightning" (CW*);* and "The Quad" (BET).

CHASE LIEFELD (Matt) is an American actor from Orange County who can currently be seen in the series "Wolf Pack" on Paramount Plus opposite Sarah Michele Gellar.

MARDY MA (Chen) is an entrepreneur/actress/producer who has appeared in film and television projects in China, the U.S. and Great Britain. Her work includes the anguished birth

mother Liu Ling to Katie Leung's character in 2014's "One Child," produced by Sundance/BBC, and for which Ma received positive reviews. She will next be seen in the Disney+ series "American Born Chinese," co-starring with Michelle Yeoh and "Chang Can Dunk"'s Ben Wang, and Lulu Wang's Amazon series "Expats," opposite Nicole Kidman.

ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS

JINGYI SHAO's **(Writer/Director)** love of storytelling began on the floor of the library. The only child of immigrants, reading stories was his way of feeling less lonely and learning the ways of America. This love eventually transferred to filmmaking which he saw as a means to not only entertain others but also to free those hard to express thoughts and feelings within himself. Jing kicked off his career during an impromptu trip to China where odd jobs on set somehow led to him directing commercials for global brands such as Levi's, Johnnie Walker and Cartier. His commercial and shorts work would receive recognition at the Cannes Lions, D&AD and HBO Visionaries. He credits his time in China for giving him the experience and self-knowledge he needed to pursue his ultimate dream of writing and directing narrative work.

Since returning to the U.S., Jing has explored both TV and film. He was a staff writer on the inaugural season of the BET show "Boomerang" and directed two episodes of its sister show "Twenties." With projects for Amazon, Netflix and others in development, Jing is passionate about telling intimate, personal stories that nevertheless have universal appeal and bringing the marginalized and underdogs of the world into mainstream focus.

RISHI RAJANI (Producer), CEO of Hillman Grad, oversees all divisions across the company, guiding strategic direction and developing new business partnership deals with the likes of WBTV; Def Jam; Audible; and Zando.

His producing credits include "The Chi," "Twenties," "Boomerang" and "The Forty-Year-Old Version." Upcoming credits include Focus Features' "A Thousand and One," which just received the Grand Jury Prize in the U.S. Dramatic Competition at the 2023 Sundance Film Festival Awards; "Kokomo City," which just received the NEXT Audience Award and NEXT Innovator Award also at the Sundance Film Festival; "Being Mary Tyler Moore," which will premiere at this year's SXSW; and "Gifted & Black" for Amazon Prime. Rajani also originated Indeed's Rising Voices short film program, serves as an Executive Mentor for the Hillman Grad Mentorship lab, and launched a South Asian mentorship program under "The Salon."

Emmy® Award-winning writer, creator, producer, actor, and founder of Hillman Grad, **LENA WAITHE (Producer)** continues to lead the cultural revolution in Hollywood. Waithe expertly taps into emerging societal trends by speaking to myriad experiences from her unique

perspective while challenging audiences to think outside of conventional norms. Through her production company, Hillman Grad, Waithe and her team fight against the status quo by giving marginalized storytellers the opportunity to access the industry and tell their stories.

Acclaimed credits include projects like Netflix's "Master of None" and "Beauty," Showtime's "The Chi," BET's "Twenties," Universal's "Queen & Slim," Sundance award-winner "The Forty-Year-Old Version," and more. Upcoming credits include Focus Features' "A Thousand and One," which just received the Grand Jury Prize in the U.S. Dramatic Competition at the 2023 Sundance Film Festival Awards; "Kokomo City," which just received the NEXT Audience Award and NEXT Innovator Award also at the Sundance Film Festival; and "Being Mary Tyler Moore," which will premiere at this year's SXSW. Waithe will be the Ambassador at this year's American Black Film Festival.

BRAD WESTON (Producer), the Founder & CEO of MAKEREADY, has spent over 30 impressive years in the entertainment business and has presided over both major and independent studios.

In May 2017, Weston founded and launched MAKEREADY, an independent studio that develops, finances, and produces talent-driven projects, including original feature films, domestic and international premium television, premium short form digital and branded content.

MAKEREADY's next release is the 2023 Sundance Grand Jury Prize winner "A Thousand and One" on March 31. The film is the feature debut of director A.V. Rockwell with Focus Features distributing and Sight Unseen and Hillman Grad partnering. Additionally, the company "Book Club 2" for Fifth Season and Focus Features on May 12. In 2022, MAKEREADY released "Not Okay" for Searchlight Pictures and Hulu, starring Zoey Deutch and Dylan O Brien and directed by Quinn Shephard. In 2018, the company released the film "Queen & Slim," written by Emmy® Award-winner Lena Waithe ("Master of None"), directed by Grammy® winning Melina Matsoukas (Beyonce's "Formation") and starring Academy Award® winner Daniel Kaluuya ("Judas and The Black Messiah") and Jodie Turner-Smith, which debuted to critical acclaim and box office success. To date, the film has garnered nearly $50 million worldwide.

MAKEREADY has a financing deal with Fifth Season (formerly Endeavor Content) spanning feature films, television, and unscripted content. The company is in prep on "Killer Heat," a feature adaptation of the Jo Nesbø short story "The Jealousy Man" for Amazon with Philippe Lacote directing and Roberto Bentivegna writing. Other upcoming projects include a limited series adaptation of John Steinbeck's "The Grapes of Wrath" to be written and directed by Academy Award®-nominee Ramin Bahrani, an English-language remake of the Academy Award®-winning film, "Another Round," and an adaptation of the artistic short film, "Sad Day," with singer-songwriter FKA Twigs and Hiro Murai for FX.

Prior to forming MAKEREADY, Weston served as president and CEO at New Regency, beginning in 2011, where he ushered in an auteur and creative-focused era. Under his purview, the company received a remarkable 34 Academy Award® nominations and 12 wins. Films include Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu's Academy Award®-nominated Best Picture "The Revenant" and Adam McKay's Academy Award®-nominated Best Picture "The Big Short," the back-to-back Academy Award®-winning Best Pictures "Birdman" and "12 Years A Slave," David Fincher's "Gone Girl" and Darren Aronofsky's biblical epic "Noah."

Weston began his career in marketing at Lucasfilm and then went on to produce six independent films. In 2000, he was named president of Dimension Films where he closely oversaw and executive produced the hugely successful "Spy Kids" trilogy, "Scary Movie 2 & 3," "The Others," "Bad Santa" and Robert Rodriguez's "Sin City."

In 2005, Weston joined Paramount Pictures as president of production and was responsible for such films as "Star Trek," "Cloverfield," "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button," "World Trade Center," "GI Joe," "The Fighter" and "Rango." As a result of working closely together on the mutual successes of their films, Weston was able to develop and maintain relationships with some of the most sought-after filmmakers in the industry including JJ Abrams, David Fincher, Gore Verbinski, and David O. Russell, among many others.